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On the Problem of Literary Influence*

In Two Parts—Part I

The problem of influence is one of the most difficult that comes to the Latinist. Roman literature is confessedly imitative. It begins properly with translation of the Odyssey by Livius Andronicus. The early tragic writers followed closely Sophocles and Euripides. Plautus and Terence even name the plays of Menander and Diphilus that they worked over for the Roman public. Ennius introduced the dactylic hexameter in his Annals, and in his epic technique followed Homer in innumerable places. Lucilius mingled Greek and Latin together in his Satires. Varro excerpted the Greek technical literature. Even Cato, the typical Roman of the Republic, found it necessary to study Greek in his old age. Norden¹ has shown that the formal rules of rhetoric were followed in Roman narrative. Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid were confessed Alexandrians. Cicero constructed his speeches according to Greek rules, and his Philosophical works are little more than missionary documents of Greek culture. Horace sums up Greek influence in the well known words

Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes
Intulit agresti Latio.²

Vergil's great poem, which the Romans accepted as their national epic, is so permeated with Greek influence that for centuries controversy has raged about its originality, and

there have been those who have regarded it as a pale and weak reflection of the Iliad and Odyssey. The elder Pliny spent his life with notebook in hand, jotting down matter for his cyclopædia, from Greek sources. Is it any wonder that the popular view of Roman literature is what it is? Is it remarkable that the freshness and originality of Greek literature appeal to the young philologist, and that Latin is regarded so often with patronizing approval, if not with pitying contempt? That a mature scholar, even, should decline to read the Eclogues of Vergil in comparison with the Idylls of Theocritus, and that another should apologize for Horace in the presence of Alcæus and Sappho? And if the gift of Rome to modern civilization is to be sought elsewhere than in its literature; if the Roman people were rather doers than thinkers, rather practical than speculative, is their literature wholly imitative? Is there no element of originality in it? Has that Roman character, so forceful in other directions, accomplished nothing in literature that has not been done as well or better by the Greeks? That I can not believe. *Satura tota nostra est* says Quintilian,³ and Greek literature has nothing comparable with Martial in his special field. And from the earliest to the latest in the catalogue of Latin writers there is both an individual and national imprint. The first line of Livius-Virum mihi, Camena, insece versutum —, the work of a Greek to be sure, still differs fundamentally from the mellifluous *Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλά*—

There is an abruptness of statement, a conciseness of phrasing, a significance of command in the Latin that is lacking in the Greek. And Ausonius, one of the latest of the Latins, when he wrote

Prima urbes inter, Divum domus, aurea Roma,

³ X, I, 93

* President's address (in part) before the Philological Association of the Pacific Coast, San Francisco, December 27, 1904.

¹ Die antike Kunstprosa

² Ep II i 156

in giving but this one line to Rome while taking a dozen or more for the other famous cities of antiquity, did he not, by this very economy of words, show forth the imperial character of the capital of the world? In Roman literature there must be something Roman, and that Roman element is the national element which makes the literature distinctive and to that degree independent. It has been said that appreciation of Roman literature usually comes with middle life. It is only when a man has actually lived long enough to administer his own affairs and to observe the necessity of government and law that he is able to recognize the national element in Roman literature and in the language too. He does not then emphasize the agreement of the two classical literatures, gladly leaving to Greek the preeminence in things Hellenic,⁴ as he grants to French literature in its turn the palm for grace and clarity, but he sees in the Latin Roman order, Roman discipline, Roman law. Consider how Ennius laid down the rules for the Latin hexameter. Homer, to the Latin, was reckless in his monosyllabic closes, his trochaic caesuras, his lines all dactyls or all spondees, his apparent dismemberment of words. Such variety is Hellenic and distracting. It was necessary that his license should be curtailed, and gradually Ennius turned away from the Homeric model. The canons of the hexameter as finally determined by Vergil and Ovid are as fixed and definite as any other set of Roman laws. The Roman genius demanded order, decision, finality. It abhorred uncertainty; things must be settled. Questions must be closed once for all. The rule must be established and ever observed. How can a plural noun now take a singular verb, and now a plural? Down with such lawlessness. Is super to take the ablative or accusative? If the authorities will not decide, then don't use the word at all. Is the final *e* of the adverb *temere* long or short? *Adhuc sub iudice lis est*, so if you must use it put it where the *e* must be elided or where a metrical rule permits a common quantity. Do two initial consonants lengthen a preceding short vowel? Don't let such a thing occur, and then you will not go on record. This regard for law appeals to certain

temperaments, and it is not strange that as the Greek type and the Roman type of mind are found in this twentieth century still, that the admirers of Roman literature should see in it virtues that are hidden or disregarded by the Hellenist.

Now imitation appears in form and in subject matter. And by form I mean the outward shape and the means of expression, and by subject matter the thought of conception which is transferred to the written page. The first element of form is, of course, the alphabet; and in a sense just as Roman literature is Hellenic because the Romans got their alphabet from the Greeks, so modern European literature is in some degree Latin because the Latin alphabet is used. Whether there is really any influence latent in the use of a common alphabet would be a subject worthy of inquiry, but for our present task, with its limitations, I must regard it as inappreciable.

The second element of form is vocabulary. yet who would say that modern natural science is mainly Hellenic because the Greek dictionary is sometimes anxiously thumbed by our scientists? And yet, if a word is strange, unusual, characteristic, we may say that its use betrays imitation, conscious or unconscious. mediate or immediate.

And next comes rhythm. Psychologists tell us that the style is the man in a sense not formerly understood in our experience, and when we detect imitations daily of living speakers we can not deny existence of this form of influence. And here what is called conventionalism comes in. As fairy stories begin "once on a time" so conventional forms were early adopted. When we can trace a literary species to a founder we may say that the conventional treatment was established by that founder. And yet we must remember that the human mind works in certain ways, and, given a certain thought, expression is likely to assume a certain general form. As the infant child learns to walk without conscious imitation of prehistoric man, so certain common thoughts will inevitably assume common expression. We shall not, then, be justified in assuming imitation in form unless the agreement has either some personal element or some element characteristic of a literary species; and when every allowance has been made for coincidence, for common linguistic and syntactical expression and for psychological law, we can say only then that there is imitation.

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⁴ Cf Aen VI 847 sq.